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Published online: 16 May 2022.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Selling sustainability: investigating how Swedish fashion brands communicate sustainability to consumers

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ABSTRACT

Over the last thirty years, sustainability has become a growing concern in the fashion industry. While there is agreement among a growing range of actors regarding the need to engage with the social and environmental challenges created by the fashion industry, there is less consent regarding what sustainability entails. Although "sustainability" may be intuitively understood, it has different meanings, depending on how it is applied, and who it is applied by. Without a clear-cut definition, sustainability becomes subjective. In this context, there is a need for research at the intersection of brand-sustainability initiatives and their communication to consumers, who play a vital role in this transition. Drawing on a case study of the Swedish fashion industry, we explore how evolving industrial business models and emerging best practices are informed by a robust understanding of sustainability. We evaluate how brands communicate sustainability to consumers across three key sites: brand websites (including corporate social responsibility reports), social media platforms, and in-store campaigns. We found that not only do brands use a range of practices to define sustainability differently, but furthermore, these definitions vary depending on the context. Considering the industry's ongoing history with greenwashing, it is vital to address and confront this issue head on. We argue that there is a need to determine what constitutes sustainability in the fashion industry and, in turn, hold businesses to that standard. As COVID-19 has only magnified and intensified these challenges, the article explores the implications of a more robust approach for both theory and practice.

Introduction

The twenty-first century is increasingly defined by a focus on sustainability, of which the fashion industry is no exception (Brydges et al. 2021; Mukendi et al. 2020). The fashion industry has longstanding sustainability concerns, whether that be around the environmental impact of production and consumption (Henninger, Alevizou, and Oates 2016; Athwal et al. 2019), the anti-sweatshop movements of the 1990s (Klein 2010), or more recently through modern-day slavery allegations (Dickson and Warren 2020) and growing concerns regarding the overproduction and overconsumption of garments (Brydges et al. 2021). The popularity and dominance of fast fashion—a business model which marries rapid-paced production of trendy designs with low-cost production—has fueled both the overconsumption and underutilization of garments and challenged working conditions in garment-producing countries (e.g., Bangladesh) (Iran and Schrader 2017; Brydges

and Hanlon 2020; Kabeer, Huq, and Sulaiman 2020). Indeed, much of the industry is locked into this lucrative yet exploitative and unsustainable business model (Niinimäki 2018).

In response, from the annual Copenhagen Fashion Summit, the 2019 G7 Summit, the Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Partnership Platform "SDGs for Better Fashion," both industrial and (non-) governmental bodies have advocated for the fashion industry to develop and implement practices that not only protect the environment, but also align with broader climate-action guidelines. Many are also calling for greater social sustainability regulations to prevent tragedies such as Rana Plaza, a disaster that saw 1,134 garment workers lose their lives in Bangladesh (Reinecke and Donaghey 2015). Across the industry, there are also growing calls for *systemic change*, and the need to overcome challenges highlighted in and

across fashion/textile supply chains, such as the Rewiring Fashion campaign initiated by the Business of Fashion or the Manifesto for a Fashion Revolution by Fashion Revolution.

While the magnitude of the sustainability crises facing the industry may appear to be well understood, questions, such as "Can fashion ever be sustainable?" (Ro 2020) or "Sustainable fashion? There is no such thing" (Indvik 2020) remain commonplace. Here, a critical challenge relates to the meaning of the word, as notions of sustainability are subjective. Terminology used to unpack a brand's sustainability varies across "the ecofashion lexicon" (Thomas 2008, 530). Indeed, there are important distinctions between various terms in play, and these may be understood, and operationalized, variously by different stakeholders working to address social and environmental challenges associated with the global fashion and apparel industry.

Although "sustainability" may be intuitively understood, without a clear-cut definition it can have different meanings, which is mirrored when discussing sustainable fashion (e.g., Fletcher and Tham 2019; Mukendi et al. 2020). Thus, there is a need to explore how newly established "best practices" can be underpinned by a robust understanding of sustainability. In this article, we turn to "sustainability" as an umbrella concept to not only signal the ever-expanding breadth of issues found within and across the sector—from animal rights and deforestation to worker rights and gender-based violence—but also to capture the interconnected nature of the issues at hand. Each does not exist in isolation from the other. Rather, the social and environmental challenges facing clothing production and consumption are systemic, intricately woven together, and connected to structural inequalities.

There is a need for research at the intersection of brand-sustainability initiatives and the communication of these initiatives to consumers across retail environments. In the current economic environment, in which fashion brands have had to close operations and move to online platforms in response to COVID-19 safety protocols, communicating sustainability and associated best practices becomes ever more challenging. Not only do brands have to deal with the ongoing and unpredictable conditions surrounding their pivot from in-person targeted messaging to an online environment, but they also have had to deal with increased media fragmentation. Social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok) have changed the way brands communicate to and with the public (e.g., Bürklin, Henninger, and Boardman 2019). Brands must now engage in real time, dialogic interactions.

Using online platforms, consumers have the (digital) space to publicly endorse companies, acting in a best-case scenario as ambassadors, or, in a worst-case scenario, expose brands for practices they deem as unsustainable. Mapping knowledge-dissemination strategies from brands related to sustainability provides critical insight into the opportunities and challenges they face in the transition to a more sustainable fashion industry (Henninger, Alevizou, and Oates 2017). Reputation management related to corporate social responsibility (CSR) must move beyond the confines of an annual report (e.g., Wells et al. 2021), buried on the brand website, to instead be woven within and across digital communication strategies.

We turn to practices of CSR to consider the various strategies brands employ to mitigate their social and environmental footprints, including partnerships with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other stakeholder groups. CSR has come to represent the policies and practices used by companies to demonstrate engagement and commitments within and across their supply chains—whether by pledges, for example, for climate action through a reduction in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (UNCC 2021), decreasing use of toxic chemicals (Greenpeace 2018), assurances in forest stewardship (Canopy n.d.), or support for labor rights (AFBSB 2021).

Thus, we pose the following research questions:

1. To what degree are evolving business models and emerging best practices informed by a *robust understanding of sustainability*?
2. How is sustainability articulated to consumers in terms of facts and overall narrative (best practices)?

We draw on a case study of the Swedish fashion industry to investigate how the country's fashion brands communicate sustainability to consumers. The Swedish context was chosen purposefully for three main reasons. First, Sweden is ranked as the second most sustainable country globally (Robeco 2021). Second, the Stockholm fashion show has been deemed to "demonstrate leadership in sustainability" (Robinson 2021). Finally, the Swedish government has pledged to move away from a linear economy to support circular alternatives (Sweden.se 2021).

Literature review

What is sustainable fashion?

Sustainable fashion is a vast and highly contested terrain with countless definitions and interpretations, as well as terminology that has often been used interchangeably including green, eco, organic,

or slow fashion (e.g., Joergens 2006; Henninger et al. 2017; Blazquez et al. 2020). Mukendi et al. (2020) argue that sustainable fashion cannot be defined in absolute terms, given that "what sustainability is" is subject to change, depending on "needs" and technological innovations, and thus, emerges either as a result of pragmatic or radical changes. For example, Hur and Cassidy (2019) found that designers emphasized environmental, rather than social, dimensions of sustainability, while Gurova and Morozova (2018) define sustainable fashion as items that are produced locally and in low quantities, using eco-friendly, quality materials, which are designed for longevity. Clark's (2008) definition of slow fashion emphasizes that this idea is about more than simply reducing production and consumption cycles; it is a philosophy and way of creating fashion.

For others sustainable fashion is a combination of (1) sustainable development and (2) fashion (Lundblad and Davies 2016). The former is defined as meeting the needs of current generation without compromising the needs of future generations (WCED 1987). Although heavily criticized and part of a political doctrine, the definition alludes to ensuring that life is preserved, and that social and environmental challenges are intrinsically connected. This links to Fletcher and Tham's (2019) notion of Earth Logic which focuses on two issues: (1) developing new practices and understandings to look after the health and survival of the planet and (2) knowledge generation and dissemination. Elkington (2006) visualizes sustainability as overlapping circles, whereby sustainability is represented as the interchange between social, environmental, and economic aspects, with culture having been added more recently to the mix.

These definitions bear similarity to related terms such as *ethical* and *slow* fashion, found within a seemingly ever growing "eco-fashion lexicon" (Thomas 2008, 530). Ethical fashion focuses more on the social angle and promotes "fair trade principles with sweatshop-free labor conditions while not harming the environment or workers by using biodegradable and organic cotton" (Joergens 2006, 361), while slow fashion is "about designing, producing, consuming and living better … [It is] a different approach in which designers, buyers, retailers and consumers are more aware of the impacts of products on workers, communities and ecosystems" (Fletcher 2007).

While definitions may vary, understandings of what it means to be sustainable surround issues of social justice and environmental security, in relation to systems and processes of production, consumption, and disposal. A key consequence of these different terms and notions of sustainability is also linked to brand communication, in that claims about sustainability could be made, which may be difficult to prove, through a lack of transparency and common definition (Granskog et al. 2020; Hughes 2020). Market insights highlight that "shoppers don't trust fashion brands' sustainability claims" (Pinnock 2021) due to a fear of greenwashing (Harris, Roby, and Dibb 2016; Granskog et al. 2020; Hughes 2020), and rather see sustainability increasingly as being synonymous with expensive (Ritch and Schröder 2012).

More recently, the concept of circular fashion has also joined the ranks. The circular economy is an influential concept, applied to a growing array of industries to maximize resource use and minimize waste (Geissdoerfer et al. 2017). The circular economy is generally understood to have three key principles: design out waste and pollution, keep products and materials in use, and regenerate natural systems (Niinimäki 2018). There is a growing body of literature investigating the implementation of circular economy principles in the fashion industry such as take-back initiatives (Hvass and Pedersen 2019), secondhand fashion (Hur 2020), and textile recycling (Sandvik and Stubbs 2019).

In summary, there is an expanding range of terms and definitions of sustainability in the fashion industry which are accompanied by a variety of practices and activities.

Sustainability communications

The previous section outlined various definitions of sustainability that while similar in nature can also differ in terms of their focus. Thus, unsurprisingly, communicating what sustainability means and also how these messages and initiatives conform with consumers' demands, is challenging. Communicating sustainability refers to brands seeking to raise awareness about how their products and/or services align with social, economic, and environmental sustainability. The aim of sustainability communication is not to simply broadcast targeted, one-way messages, but rather to encourage dialogic communication between brands and their respective stakeholders (Henninger and Oates 2018).

This article focuses on organizational communication, which deals with public relations, including CSR, media, investor relations, and environmental communications (Henninger and Oates 2018; Luo et al. 2021). When brands communicate with their stakeholders, they encode their message and forward it to a transmitter (e.g., brand website, social media) which is then picked up by the receiver (audience/stakeholders). The receiver decodes the message and

makes sense of it (Fill 2009; Boardman and Mccormick 2021). Transmitting messages that have social and environmental sustainability cues can indicate to consumers that brands produce garments that have a reduced impact on the environment compared to their counterparts. Brands that use sustainability communications seek to (ideally) alter their consumers' consumption patterns to be more environmentally and socially conscious, as such, communication can be a powerful tool (Henninger, Alevizou, and Oates 2017) that may also support *systemic transformation* and disseminate best practices that are informed by a robust understanding of sustainability.

The twenty-first century has seen increased media fragmentation fostered by the development of social media platforms that allow for messages to spread instantaneously, 24 hours per day and seven days per week, with a global reach, and to facilitate dialogues between brands and consumers, and among consumers (Bürklin, Henninger, and Boardman 2019). The emergence of digital communication implies it is "easy,… convenient and…incredibly powerful; not because of technology, but because of how that technology nurtures the connection between people" (Ryan and Jones 2012, 153).

Brands can no longer hide, and are often scrutinized for their actions, which can spread like wildfire once in motion. Recent examples where this has happened include scandals, such as burning unsold products (Shannon 2020), or association with modern slavery issues in fashion-supply chains in developed countries (Duncan 2020). Such media reports have shaken consumer trust, with conscious consumers increasingly being aware of issues relating to greenwashing, whereby consumers feel that certain broadcasted messages may not tell the entire truth or are misleadingly written. Moreover, CSR practices have been seen to amplify tensions between brands and their suppliers, as companies attempt to balance conflicting interests and demands from stakeholders and conscious consumers alike (Kabeer, Huq, and Sulaiman 2020).

Turunen and Halme (2021) indicated that although brands are increasingly communicating sustainability messages, one of the key challenges that remains is making these actionable and thus, consumer-oriented. For example, to overcome issues related to greenwashing, brands have started acquiring third-party accreditations (e.g., Öko-Tex, GOTS) which highlight that companies use, for example, less harmful chemicals in their production processes or generally more environmentally friendly materials (Testa et al. 2015). Implementing codes of conduct to be audited and certified by a third party is another approach to measure and communicate accountability (LeBaron and Lister 2015).

A key benefit for consumers is that they can easily identify whether a brand has a label or not and as such is third-party accredited. Yet, there are drawbacks associated with these labels, in that they may only cover certain aspects (e.g., use of chemicals), are costly and often unaffordable for smaller brands, or not recognized by consumers (Turunen and Halme 2021). However, code-of-conduct audits are not necessarily effective at flagging issues beyond the surface (see, for example, LeBaron and Lister 2015). This was illustrated in a recent investigation by *The New York Times* which suggests that the amount of certified organic cotton sold in India far exceeds what is actually grown in the country (Wicker et al. 2022). This is an example of a situation that can have implications not only for certification organizations but for the brands that rely on these certifications as key pillars of their sustainability commitments.

Company approaches may be limited when it comes to notions of transparency, however, not least with respect to certification standards (LeBaron, Lister, and Dauvergne 2017) and models of economic growth (Fletcher and Tham 2019). Where CSR practices may include standards in corporate governance, these provisions are tied to an "ethical audit regime" (LeBaron, Lister, and Dauvergne 2017). Standards carried out through CSR "from above" are not value neutral but are established and enforced by elite stakeholders imposing "new social regimes of power and inequality" (De Neve 2009, 63). Even with audits in place, practices of benchmarking brands based on compliance with corporate-led standards work to support what LeBaron, Lister, and Dauvergne (2017) have understood as "the industry-led privatization of global governance" (2017, 958).

When we understand knowledge as situated (Dengler and Seebacher 2019; see also Haraway 1988), critical reflection on social location and positionality must be part of the work to be done. If calls for degrowth seek to challenge structural inequalities embedded within the "colonial global economy" (Bhambra 2021) researchers must devote attention to dynamics of power. For Dengler and Seebacher (2019), "[a] feminist decolonial degrowth approach is needed to avoid the unintended reproduction of patriarchal and colonial continuities" (Dengler and Seebacher 2019, 247). Challenges related to "sustainability" are thus vast, diverse, and divergent as brands are tasked to consider social and environmental impact(s) differently, and in tandem, across multiple spaces, contexts, and temporalities.

Table 1. Data summary.

Brand	Category	Role
Brand 1	Children's clothing	Sourcing and sales manager
Brand 2	Children's clothing	Sustainability manager
Brand 3	Children's clothing	Product manager
Brand 4	Denim	Sustainability coordinator
Brand 5	Designer bags/accessories	Sustainability manager
Brand 6	Designer menswear	Co-founder
Brand 7	Designer menswear/womenswear	Sustainability specialist
Brand 8	Designer womenswear	Founder
Brand 9	Fast fashion	Sourcing manager
Brand 10	Fast fashion (womenswear)	CSR and quality manager
Brand 11	Independent fashion	Founder
Brand 12	Independent fashion	Founder
Brand 13	Independent fashion (upcycled)	Co-founder
Brand 14	Outdoor apparel	CEO
Brand 15	Outdoor apparel	Founder and CEO
Brand 16	Secondhand retailer	Sourcing manager
Brand 17	Sustainable basic apparel	Co-founder
Brand 18	Sustainable menswear	Founder and CEO
Brand 19	Womenswear accessories	Sustainability and brand manager

Free-form sustainability communication is a further way to communicate sustainability messages to consumers (Peattie and Crane 2005). Free-form implies that these messages are not verified by third-party organizations but rather are claims made by the organizations themselves about their own products (Henninger 2015; Turunen and Halme 2021). The International Standards Organization (ISO) defines these claims as falling into their Type II category, outlining that they are one-sided (e.g., from the organization or manufacturer) and self-declared. Thus, free-from sustainability communication seeks to appeal to consumer emotions by discussing aspects of transparency and traceability along the production process and more generally along the entire supply chain (Alevizou 2020). While this free-form communication is more accessible to companies, as it is self-declared content, it does not have "costs" associated with it (unlike eco-labels). Yet, it could foster distrust, as the information provided is based on claims made by the company that may be written in vague and ambiguous language (Alevizou 2020; Turunen and Halme 2021). A vicious cycle emerges in which third-party accreditations may be more reliable, yet costly, while free-form information, although truthful, may be seen as less reliable and biased. One key issue that neither form of communication addresses is how messages that are communicated can be actioned by consumers, which is an aspect addressed in this research.

Methodology

This qualitative research draws on 19 semi-structured interviews conducted with small, medium, and large fashion-design brands based in Sweden between January and December 2019. Prior to conducting this research, we created a database of Swedish fashion brands communicating about sustainability either in stores, on their website, or through their social media accounts. A total of 85 brands were contacted, for a response rate of 22% (Table 1).

As also outlined in Table 1, the fashion brands included in this study represent a broad range of categories that were purposely chosen to gain a better understanding as to what sustainability messages are communicated and how emerging best practices could inform a robust understanding of sustainability. We interviewed different sized brands to gain a better feel for the status quo in terms of sustainable fashion communication and what our respondents felt might influence consumer behavior over the long term.

Semi-structured interviews enabled us to develop a protocol that covered themes of interest while also allowing for conversations to expand on topics or to explore new ones that were of interest. The range of questions that we asked covered aspects of the history and motivations behind the brand; the business structure, sourcing and design decisions; and the critical challenges and opportunities related to sustainability and the circular economy. Emphasis was placed on exploring where and how sustainability policies and initiatives are communicated to consumers. While we are not able to generalize from this study's findings, this study can foster insights into current best practices and how these may be communicated. This is especially important because different segments of the fashion industry often prioritize different strategies. For instance, promotion of children's clothing may focus to a greater degree on materials as parents are inclined to be more conscious of what their children wear. By contrast, denim manufactures might be apt to emphasize supply-chain issues related to dyeing and finishing jeans or other items.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and sent to the respondents to review (Valentine 2005). We then coded the transcripts according to dominant themes and analyzed and used these categories for

theory-building (Cope 2005). To achieve inter-coder reliability, we independently coded parts of the data before we discussed the results and resolved any discrepancies. All respondents have been strictly anonymized to protect the identity of participating brands.

Results

Communicating sustainability on brand websites

Most of the brand representatives that we interviewed work for a business with a company website which has a dedicated sustainability section. On each fashion brand's landing page, sustainability is typically presented along the header or the footer of the homepage, alongside other company details including "about us," "careers," and "terms and conditions" (e.g., Luo et al. 2021). In addition to sustainability, terms such as "corporate social responsibility," "codes of conduct," or "social rights" are used and these features reflect the complexities associated with sustainability as an intuitively understood concept. Approaches to sustainability vary across businesses, in that some had either a stronger focus on social sustainability through *social rights* or *corporate social responsibility* as opposed to an environmental focus.

Moreover, in addition to the focus of their sustainability efforts, brands take different approaches in deciding how to showcase this information. For example,

> We need to create desire for the products that we sell by getting into the hearts and minds of the customers. We don't want to stigmatize the brand and run the risk of being too niche by putting sustainability front and center. But, we do make sure that all of the information that you ever could possibly want is available: traceability, labor aspects, certificates of organic cotton, and whatnot (Interview, Brand 7).

This approach demonstrates that one way of sharing sustainability information and communicating with stakeholders is via a "one-stop-shop" approach whereby it is up to the "receiver" to decipher the message and pick out elements that are of interest. How these sustainability-related messages are portrayed to the audience can differ depending on the brand. For instance, childrens-wear brands seem to focus more on imagery and emotional appeal to parents while outdoor brands center on nature, wildlife, and ultimately the harmony between the brand and the natural environment (Fletcher and Tham 2019).

Websites of brands within this research relied on a combination of free-form communication processes and third-party certifications. Thus, audiences,

on one hand, need to evaluate whether they trust the free-form communication aspects and/or if they are put at ease through third-party certifications. In both instances, consumers (or other stakeholders) rely on the brand to disclose accurate information that is traceable and reliable (e.g., Henninger 2015; Turunen and Halme 2021).

Brands also risk alienating consumers that may not be interested in sustainability or are more skeptical of brands that have a sustainable angle. This is a risk which aligns with key challenges associated with free-form communication: the trustworthiness of the messages provided and the assumption that the receiver can understand them (Alevizou 2020; Turunen and Halme 2021). Yan et al. (2020) highlight that consumers may also not always have the necessary level of sustainability knowledge to translate willingness into actual action and this lapse is partially due to the sheer volume and overwhelming scale of information available on websites.

To make the communication of sustainability more manageable or reader-friendly, sustainability-related information on the brands' websites tends to be organized into several sections that move across production networks. For example, a brand might begin with information pertaining to fabrics and raw materials, progressing on to discussions about manufacturing and commitments to garment workers, and finally considering garment care (i.e., washing, recycling, mending). This growing focus on care seems to be aligned with circular economy discussions around how to extend the life of a garment, although most brands do not use language pertaining to circularity in their sustainability messaging.

While sustainability is not new, communicating sustainability messages on websites remains a relatively recent phenomenon, which has gained popularity in the last decade (Luo et al. 2021). This is seen in the case of Brand 8:

> [Our] brand sustainability page has been there for four or five years now, but as it looks today is actually pretty new. The new content has been there for about a year and a half, but the design is only three months old. We have been constantly trying to improve the site and make it better.

We also found that various brands actively withheld communications related to sustainability. For example, Brand 10 insists:

> [F]or much of our brand's history, we took an active decision to not shout out what we do in terms of sustainability in order to minimize the number of discussions from the media and NGOs.

This was especially the case for fast fashion brands. For instance, Brand 10 noted that "the more

we spoke, the more issues we got." In other words, the more information they provided, the more they were to be scrutinized. The respondent went on to remark:

> Despite it all, because we are a fast fashion brand, this is a conversation we need to have. We just need to do our homework, share how we are working with sustainability and tackle the hard questions when they come up.

While our interviewees recognized a clear need to communicate how they engaged with sustainability, they also understood that being too transparent could invite negative attention.

This observation links to Kolb and Kozlowski (2019) observations about "honesty" and provides an opportunity for systemic transformation. Rather than seeing sustainability as an ultimate state, it should be interpreted as a "way of work" or philosophical approach (Clark 2008; Fletcher and Tham 2019) that challenges the status quo and continuously improves current practices by learning from identified shortcomings. Yet, for this to become a reality, it is vital for thought processes surrounding sustainability to also include tangible examples for how sustainability can be enacted.

In response to growing consumer expectations, many brand websites have developed highly interactive tools, which include incorporating a range of infographics, images, and videos to try, in the words of our respondent from Brand 9, to:

> [E]ducate the consumer through videos we have created. For example, telling the consumer to wash their clothing less or how to repair a garment. We are encouraging customers to shop as they say in Swedish *klimatsmart*, so climate-smart.

This observation links to a key issue highlighted in the previous section in that there is generally a lack of actionable, customer-oriented messaging available (Turunen and Halme 2021). Although Brand 9 provided actionable information, whether it is feasible to act upon it is a different question. Washing clothes less often may not be an option, especially if we think of certain market segments, such as children's clothing. Similarly, if there are no detailed instructions on how to repair garments, it is questionable if consumers can do so on their own. Not only would mending require a certain skill set, but it also suggests a potential need for tools (e.g., sewing machine, thread, needles), which may no longer be part of household essentials. Thus, whether the consumer engages in the care and repair practices promoted by the brand or not will depend on individual dispositions.

Communication theory suggests that fashion brands should communicate their sustainability messages in a way that is easily understood by their recipients. Some brands also use the sustainability section of their website to showcase their CSR reports. These reports have become more comprehensive over time, incorporating broader definitions of sustainability and a wider range of metrics. However, a more accessible communication approach can be achieved through using platforms such as Instagram or TikTok, which consist of gaining short, snappy messages accompanying photos or videos, which are more easily digestible and often more engaging.

Thus, finding a balance on how much to communicate is essential, as too much information is overwhelming, yet too little can be seen as holding back and leading to distrust, especially when related to free-form communication.

Free-form communication is not the only way to communicate. Brands can also turn to a growing range of third-party accreditations as a potentially more trustworthy alternative. For example, several of our participants partner with the Fair Wear Foundation, a nonprofit organization that conducts independent, third-party verification of member brands' factories and this information is then made available online. These reports are generally highly detailed and can add credibility and transparency to a brand's sustainability reporting.

With certifications, brands hope to showcase their capacity to measure up against certain industry-benchmark standards. However, third-party endorsements are limited in their capacity to capture and communicate the dynamic nature of a company's supply chain (LeBaron and Lister 2015). Similar to third-party accreditation, which we found was predominantly held by large organizations, firms also produced CSR reports that were readily available on their websites. This was a feature that smaller companies did not generally have.

An explanation for this difference could be that larger brands typically have more robust teams of dedicated staff working on issues pertaining to sustainability and smaller counterparts lack the resources (financial or otherwise) to produce formal in-house reports and also are less likely to be able to afford the services of sustainability consultancies that could prepare such information on their behalf. However, smaller brands (including outerwear, children's clothing, and independent fashion brands) were still active in sharing sustainability-related information, albeit typically in a less thorough manner. This lack of detail and/or third-party reporting could pose a challenge for smaller brands, as consumers could perceive these brands as "hiding" information, even though it is more likely the outcome of limited resources to produce or commission such reports.

Finally, not all of the fashion brands that we interviewed are using sustainability as part of their online marketing. While some are highlighting sustainability as a source of distinction, there are others that do not want to be known as a sustainable or eco-labeled brand. This was clearly the case for the respondent for Brand 7 who noted:

> For customers who want to know more about sustainability, we put that information on our website. But, it's not part of our marketing to consumers. We try to be transparent but are not working toward being a "green" company or something like that.

Our reading of Swedish fashion-brand websites is that while they do not bring us closer to a definition, they provide an insight into how sustainability-related messages are disseminated. Fashion brands are using their websites to support transparency and to communicate a broad range of sustainability initiatives. However, what sustainability entails varies considerably from brand to brand and at times may be more inferred than explicitly stated.

Social media

Social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) are popular, highly visual, and increasingly lucrative branding tools and they are used as informal channels to communicate CSR practices (Reilly and Larya 2018). Instagram was the most widely used platform among the brands that we interviewed for this study. It allows brands to share images (typically with short text captions and hashtags) as well as videos (or "stories") with their customers. While images remain on the profile of their account, stories last 24 hours before disappearing. Brands can also "go live" in videos, and both stories and live videos can be saved to the brand's profile, curating information for visitors to view later.

Contrary to websites, Instagram fosters dialogic communication and customer engagement, which is important for these brands. For example,

> There are a lot of downsides of social media, but one upside is the fact that you have direct access to your customer. We do a lot of brand building and teaching and education directly toward the end consumer, through social media. And it's not only us telling them but a two-way discussion about what is sustainability and what's important for them, how they make their choices, and how we can be a better choice for them (Brand 9).

Instagram is also where a desirable demographic lives, namely young consumers (Moatti and Abecassis-Moedas 2018). As the respondent for Brand 10 remarked, "We are on social media because we want to reach out to our young consumers on the platforms they are engaging with." This interviewee also insisted,

> [I]t is still a challenge to articulate our sustainability policies to consumers on social media. Talking about chemicals and the like is not sexy. It's quite serious. It is a challenge to communicate what we are doing in a way that consumers can understand and also be interested in.

Here again, brands are challenged to strike a balance between educating consumers on best practices related to sustainability without turning them away.

One way of overcoming this challenge is through the video-story feature. For instance, the respondent for Brand 19 noted, "we can go to a factory and begin to live stream what we are working on. It doesn't matter if the video is unfiltered or unedited. It is an experience that is meant to be that way." Brands reported that online communication is not only cheaper than, for example, in-person communication but also allows for more creativity, in that videos can be unedited and experimental, yet shared globally within seconds.

Nonetheless, while social media is appealing to customers, brands have faced hesitation from stakeholders who are wary of participating in this form of communication.

> We have had to explain to our suppliers and manufacturers that we want to document and photograph everything for our website and our social media. To some factories it was quite odd, but once they realized that it was about appreciating the craft and having the average consumer understand what goes into their clothing and value the garment that they're making more, they just felt an enormous sense of pride in being photographed and documented (Brand 6).

Although there has been a move from brands to go beyond their corporate websites and develop new ways of communicating their sustainability efforts to consumers (Reilly and Larya 2018), key challenges remain. Social media platforms offer quick and easy access to consumers, and act as the "cheerful" companion to broadcasting messages, as such "it can still be difficult to add sustainability information to social media because it can be quite … heavy" (Brand 10). With more brands using Instagram, it can be challenging to stand out from the crowd and to develop content that is engaging.

> I follow a lot of different companies on Instagram and everyone is screaming about different things. About the environment or animals or what have you. It feels like a short-term trend. That's why I think you really should concentrate on doing good things. Not screaming about them all the time, just do it (Brand 14).

As this quote highlights, if everyone celebrates, it can be hard for a consumer to decipher what makes an individual brand stand out and what systemic transformation may actually have taken place. Reflecting on the "honesty" approach (Kolb and

Kozlowski 2019), this is not to say that brands should hide what they do and not celebrate their achievements, but rather be transparent and honest about the sustainability actions they have taken.

While social media can prove to be a valuable tool for brands to engage in sustainability-related conversations with their customers, it is also important to keep in mind that brands do not have control over those conversations. For example, one interviewee shared an experience about posting on Instagram a series of images featuring garments that were produced using eco-friendly textiles. Rather than steering a discussion regarding the quality of the textiles, consumers instead began criticizing the brand for using images that had been shot on-location on the other side of the world and the carbon emissions associated with flying to the location to photograph the collection. What had been designed as a consumer-awareness campaign about the brand's use of new textiles instead turned into a social media scandal.

In summary, social media platforms, and Instagram in particular, are enablers of dialogic communication, which creates opportunities and challenges for brands. While these interactions may be more dynamic when compared to those available through a brand's website, risks related to navigating transparency remain. We found brands using discretion to showcase their efforts, all the while engaging in conversations related to sustainability.

In-store

Leslie et al. (2015) and Brydges (2018) have found that retail stores can be an important site for brands to communicate sustainability initiatives, alongside other information, to consumers. Much of this research focuses on independent and/or slow fashion brands that stake much of their reputation on being sustainable. For brands in these industry segments, sharing sustainability information with consumers is central to their story and is something they sincerely want to do (Leslie et al. 2015; Brydges 2018). However, it is also important to consider how other segments of the industry, including fast fashion brands that may not necessarily put sustainability front and center, communicate about such issues using in-store resources.

For larger, fast fashion brands, it was found that while style and trends are the key communication priorities, these brands are also looking for ways to begin to introduce sustainability into the conversation.

> We try to communicate our sustainability mandate to customers through our employees in store. They are our best ambassadors. They are with the

customer all the time, but we try to do it in a simple way. For example, when you are standing in line to try on a garment, maybe we can say something about care for the garment or talk about the fabric, such as if it is organic cotton (Brand 8).

However, these brands also identified employee education as a challenge in disseminating information around sustainability.

> We do training two to three times a year on the topic, but we also try to think of our staff. We know how hard it is to keep everyone up to date. That is why sustainability information we have on the website will always be more advanced in terms of what staff in the shop can give the consumer (Brand 9).

Communicating sustainability to consumers in retail locations becomes even more of a challenge in instances where a brand sells their garments through multi-brand retailers because they not only have limited control over the in-store experience, but also their definition of sustainability might not align with that of their retailer.

> We communicate our sustainability mandate through our own channels. When we sell in department stores, like [name], we also give them all our sustainability information. But, I don't think they share it widely. We have chosen to offer a high-quality product because that supports a longer garment life. To us, that is sustainability. However, sometimes it is hard for bigger retailers to accept that as a sustainable idea (Brand 14).

Thus, we found that brands are more likely to provide detailed sustainability information online and to offer smaller "snippets" of information about sustainability practices in person.

Finally, while the ongoing COVID-19 crisis has amplified issues relating to sustainability (cf. Brydges and Hanlon 2020), access to some brand-related information (in particular, in-stores) has been restricted. As consumers transition to online shopping, this may only serve to increase the importance of digital modes of communication. Although the pandemic has highlighted structural inequalities across the global fashion and apparel industry, there may be light on the horizon: with a new wave of consumer consciousness, fashion brands are challenged with an opportunity to cater to consumers' increasing demand for more sustainable fashion alternatives (Brydges and Hanlon 2020; Brydges et al., 2021). Further research is needed to examine the ways in which these crises continue to intersect.

Challenges in communicating sustainability

Henninger, Alevizou, and Oates (2017) argue that mapping the sustainability knowledge-dissemination

strategies of fashion brands provides critical insights into the opportunities and challenges brands face in the transition to a more sustainable fashion industry. Comparing and contrasting these strategies and practices across sites, our research has identified several challenges in communicating sustainability.

To address the scale and scope of the sustainability challenges facing the industry, brands must work strategically and flexibly across a range of sites to communicate their sustainability initiatives to consumers. We found that different modes of communication have relative strengths and weaknesses. For example, Instagram can allow a brand to share real-time and behind-the-scenes content with consumers in a way that a website or CSR report cannot achieve. At the same time, social media or brief in-person conversations are not the place to communicate detailed processes that go into sustainability reporting and auditing with which brands are engaging.

However, regardless of the site, engaging in the communication of sustainability activities is still something that brands are hesitant to do. For example,

> We have been afraid of talking about sustainability because we are not 100% sustainable. We were afraid that we would be seen as failing. We feel it is more important to just be transparent and honest, to talk about what is good and what is still a challenge … We have a responsibility to educate them, whether that is in stores, on social media or through talking to journalists. We have a responsibility to keep those conversations going (Brand 8).

Yet, given the magnitude of the sustainability crises facing the industry, brands are aware that these are issues they can no longer ignore:

> Brands need to take responsibility for their actions. We're the ones ordering the products, designing the products and putting them out there. We need to actually be transparent, not just saying one thing and doing another. So long as there is greenwashing, consumers are never going to understand the complexity and the whole picture of what we are dealing with (Brand 17).

This relates to a second challenge: the role of consumers. There is growing evidence that consumers are concerned with environmental and social sustainability challenges facing the fashion industry. However, it is important to keep in mind consumers are not a monolith. While some consumers actively engage with brands on sustainability, whether that be through reading CSR reports, or through asking questions of a brand via email or direct message, others are largely unaware of the issues facing the sector. Interviewees consistently commented on the challenges that they face in reaching new audiences.

As the respondent for Brand 2 remarked, "much of our sustainability material is for the already enlightened. Finding consumers who have no interest in sustainability is very difficult."

While brands are often quick to assign blame to consumers, it is also important to keep in mind that not all brands are vocal about their sustainability practices. Consistently, this research found that brand websites are the place that have the largest amount of information, where it is the most detailed and transparent. It is also the "safest" place for brands to put that material because it is quite discreet.

It is also important to keep in mind that transparency is not the same as sustainability. For example, in the context of labor rights, notions of "transparency" tend to focus on conditions at supplier factories, drawing attention to particular locations, such as Bangladesh. As Kabeer, Huq, and Sulaiman (2020, 1391) have shown, approaches which single out specific contexts are insufficient: "[W]e need to move from a narrow 'spotlight' perspective which confines our gaze to the locus of production to a 'floodlight' approach which illuminates the broader political economy of supply chain capitalism within which these production processes are located." While calls for, and efforts in support of, transparency may be effective at drawing attention to the complex nature of systems of production, those that focus only on a particular issue or context fail to capture the full picture.

For instance, there are brands that view it as necessary to share as much information with consumers as possible, which in turn, will inspire consumers to modify their practices. Brands have highlighted that

> [W]e believe we can change people's habits and behaviors, where they buy fewer and better items, through very high levels of transparency. If people have the information and are educated, they can make better decisions (Brand 4).

However, this causal link has yet to be demonstrated. Consumers can in theory make better or different decisions, but the reality of the situation remains unclear. This also relates to the previously mentioned challenge of whether or not brands are reaching new consumers or are confined to communicating to consumers with an existing interest in sustainability.

While some brands are increasingly transparent about how they are working to address environmental and social sustainability challenges in their supply chains, this does not necessarily mean brands are becoming more sustainable. Brands also run the risk of being open about challenges that they cannot—or will not—address, which further contradicts

their efforts in this space. This posture also exposes brands to the growing risk of greenwashing and consumers becoming even more cynical about industry-sustainability efforts. For example,

> I think it is very, very risky for a brand to say there is something as sustainable fashion. Every brand that makes a claim of sustainability is eventually going to get shot down because it is too big of a term. There's only so much that you are accountable for. Brands need to tread carefully when it comes to their terminology and we need to really scrutinize when someone makes a sustainability claim: what does what they are saying actually mean and what are they actually doing? (Brand 18).

These challenges have left us to wonder if sustainability will be a guiding concept for the fashion industry moving forward. As the respondent for Brand 17 observed,

> Sustainability is such a broad term and is not a word we've been inspired by. Clothing is not sustainable. Consumption is not sustainable. There's no such thing as sustainable consumption or sustainable fashion. We are a responsible company that holds itself accountable for the impact of our actions.

If performing—or selling—sustainability is more important than action, has the concept lost its meaning? Or, if we are to continue to invoke the notion, is a practice-based approach more useful than continually trying to pin down a definition? These are ongoing questions that remain.

Conclusion

We set out in this article to consider two key issues: (1) to explore the degree to which evolving business models and emerging practices in the fashion industry are informed by a robust understanding of sustainability and (2) to gain insights into how fashion brands communicate sustainability to consumers.

In exploring these matters, we found that Swedish fashion brands employ a range of approaches to sustainability depending on the context. Definitions of sustainability are not static but are shaped by the mode of communication (online and in-person) and whether that is a one-way or two-way flow of communication. Definitions of sustainability continue to be contested in the same way as sustainability communication is subject to varying interpretations. Despite these circumstances, however, we have seen how sustainability is performative, as brands are tasked to navigate challenges of securing consumer trust through their dynamic communication strategies, as social and environmental issues remain ever shifting. We demonstrated that while being transparent about sustainability practices is vital, being too open and honest can also pose obstacles, as consumers will criticize companies for either failing to deliver what they have promised or be seen to be greenwashing. Moreover, the channels utilized to broadcast sustainability-related messages can be size-dependent, in that large companies may have more resources to deliver CSR reports, while smaller counterparts need to make do with what they have. Brands are engaged in a balancing act, curating content with their consumers in mind. They are also actively co-constructing knowledge with customers. Thus, definitions of sustainability remain in motion, operationalized differently and uniquely through various communication strategies, in interaction with the context of the brand and its relationship with consumers, real or imagined. A key challenge here for brands, however, is that as consumers look to them for insight and perspective, they must be prepared with answers.

As a result, we contend that a *robust understanding of sustainability* should be participatory, informed by a practice-based approach that further outlines actionable tasks and is linked to consumer-centered strategies. Rather than calling on brands for static definitions of sustainability, we argue that it is necessary to engage with prevailing understandings and interventions need to reflect on-the-ground complexities. This approach also appreciates that organizations target a specific market segment which in itself may not be homogenous. Thus, utilizing a combination of different channels and approaches is vital to reach as many consumers as possible.

When it comes to understanding how messages are communicated to a target audience and, in light of new opportunities for building relationships with consumers, we have shown how brands are tasked to determine how best to share the ways in which their values align with the strategies and interventions that have been operationalized in support of social and environmental challenges. From the analysis it becomes apparent that "being actionable" is vital, in that consumers need to be able to take responsibility and actively make a difference. As demonstrated, sustainability is a complex phenomenon, thus, it is essential to carry customers and not only inspire their interest in the relevant issues, but also be part of them. Concepts that are too far removed from public sensibilities often lose their appeal very quickly. Thus, to keep sustainability a top priority consumers need to be integrated into change strategies by allowing them to share in responsibility. Using visuals and social media accounts further attracts "younger consumers" who also express inclinations of being more conscious of

the impacts that the fashion industry has on the natural and social environments.

Here we have presented a single case study, geographically bound to one country, and yet the importance of Sweden as a center for sustainable fashion was justified. Seeing as the fashion industry is not confined to a single nation, but rather operates as a truly global industry, with supply chains often spanning multiple countries and continents, the same issues emerge in numerous places. Findings relating to sustainability and its communication are thus not only relevant to this case, but to any context where stakeholders are working through communications to address social and environmental issues related to the global fashion industry. Whether the exact same issues emerge in different contexts remains an area of further investigation, inviting opportunities for researchers to conduct cross-country comparisons.'

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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